Good and bad comedy in Aristophanes' *Clouds*

James Robson

What was Aristophanes' idea of the best kind of comedy? The *Clouds* suggests that visual humour is bad and verbal humour good; but Aristophanes shows himself well capable of manipulating both.

What makes a good joke? The answer to this may at first seem fairly obvious: a good joke is one that your listeners find funny. And so regardless of whether a joke is being told to one person, to a group of friends, or even to a large theatre audience, what the author of the joke wants to hear is, surely, *laughter* – the louder and longer the better.

But is this the end of the story? Perhaps for many people it is. After all, I suspect that few of us give much thought to the style of the humorous comments we make or to how others perceive our jokes. But when we look at humour through the eyes of a professional comedian or comic writer, the world seems somewhat different. Comedians often become known for a style of delivery (e.g. dead-pan; camp); or for a character and/or catch-phrase (e.g. Daffyd as the 'only gay in the village'); or for their politics (e.g. anti-establishment; feminist). Indeed, many comedians' careers seem to depend on their humour having some special or unique quality that distinguishes them from other comics.

No laughing matter

Let us now go back 2,500 years and consider the work of Aristophanes in this light, a comic poet who was evidently just as conscious as many modern comedians of the need to have a unique selling point – and who, we might add, faced direct competition from a host of other comic playwrights each year in the dramatic contests in Athens. A useful case study when it comes to assessing Aristophanes' attitude to his own comedy is *Clouds*, a play that initially fared badly in the comic competition of 423 B.C. (gaining third place at the Great Dionysia in a year when there were, perhaps, only three playwrights competing). Unusually, Aristophanes went on to revise the play and it is this later, unperformed version of *Clouds* that has come down to us.

In the revised *Clouds*, Aristophanes' disappointment at losing the comic competition is more than evident. In particular, the Chorus makes some strong assertions about the originality and cleverness of the original *Clouds*. They speak in the first person singular, addressing the audience directly, blaming them for Aristophanes' defeat and calling the rival playwrights who beat him in 423 B.C. 'vulgar men':

> *I took you to be intelligent spectators and saw fit to let you have the first taste of this, the cleverest of my comedies – a play into which I had put a great deal of effort. Then I withdrew, defeated quite undeservedly by vulgar men. It's the clever ones among you that I blame for this …*

So, according to the Chorus, *Clouds* was a 'clever' play aimed at 'clever' spectators. But rather than dwelling on *Clouds*' 'cleverness' in general, I want instead to home in on what the Chorus says about Aristophanes as a writer of comedy. One key comment comes a few lines later, for example, when the Chorus says that Aristophanes' comedies are characterized by their novelty and ingeniousness. Speaking in the first person singular once more, they say:

> *I don't try to deceive you by bringing the same things on two and three times. Rather I always skilfully contrive to introduce new styles of comedy: all intelligent and completely different from one another.*

In general terms, then, 'good' comedy (for want of a better term) is comedy that is original and clever. And, of course, *Clouds* abounds in humour of this kind, mocking as it does many of the new intellectual movements of the day.

Killing jokes

If the secret of 'good' comedy lies in originality and intelligence, what makes 'bad' comedy? The Chorus of *Clouds* is quite specific on this point, outlining as they do ways in which the humour in Aristophanes' plays is supposedly more sophisticated than that of his rivals. The following lines are of particular interest, since they reveal to us some of the techniques used by other comic playwrights at this period to raise laughs. These methods include the use of leather phalluses with red ends (i.e. made to look like circumcised or erect penises), outrageous comic dances, and vigorous slapstick. The Chorus personifies the play as a young girl, saying:

> *Look at how modest her nature is. For a start, she has not come with a bit of stitched, dangling leather, red at the end and thick so as to give the boys a laugh. Nor has she made fun of bald men, nor danced a* cordax. *Nor is there an old man (one with a speaking part) hitting whoever's around with a stick in an attempt to disguise bad jokes. Nor does she [i.e. this comedy] rush on with torches, nor shout 'help, help!' Rather, she has come trusting in herself and her script.*

Two things mark this passage out as particularly interesting. The first is that Aristophanes is giving us here an admirably clear idea as to what he considers 'bad' comedy. As we have seen, 'good' comedy is characterized by originality and cleverness with 'good' jokes appealing to the intelligent and more discerning members of the audience. 'Bad' jokes, on the other hand, are those designed to make boys laugh and which involve physical objects and physical routines: phalluses, wild dances, comic violence, and so on. We can sum this up by saying that 'good' comedy relies on words; 'bad' humour on objects and actions. Or perhaps we can phrase it another way: 'good' comedy is

perceived with the ears; 'bad' comedy with the eyes.

Breaking his own rules

Given the strongly-worded sentiments we find here, the second point to make about this passage is all the more fascinating: namely, that nearly all the claims made about the 'modest … nature' of the play are simply untrue of the version of *Clouds* that has come down to us. Towards the end of *Clouds*, for instance, there is a good deal of slapstick comedy with Strepsiades – an old man and the play's main character – poking one of his creditors with a goad and later asking for someone to bring him a torch; and various characters, Strepsiades himself included, running around yelling for help. What is more, a few years later Aristophanes puts erect leather phalluses to devastating use in his staging of the consequences of the sex strike in *Lysistrata* (411 B.C.), and at the end of *Wasps* (422 B.C.) we find a comic dance-off between Philocleon and the sons of the tragic poet Carcinus (whom Aristophanes dresses as crabs, inspired by the fact that their father's name means 'crab' in Greek). In fact, the only technique listed here which the bald Aristophanes does not employ in some form or other in his plays is making fun of bald men!

So if Aristophanes uses all these 'bad' techniques himself, what are we to make of this passage? Why does Aristophanes have his Chorus make a series of specific claims about how his comedy is superior to his rivals' only to have most of them undermined as the play progresses? One approach may be to argue that this passage is left over from the original version of *Clouds*. This would require us to believe that the original *Clouds* contained little or none of the visual and physical humour that Aristophanes considers 'bad' and, further, that the failure of the play in the comic competition led him not only to abandon his experiment at writing 'modest' comedies but also to rewrite *Clouds* as a bawdy play. There is, however, precious little evidence to support such a view.

An alternative tack is to argue that Aristophanes is perfectly aware of the fact he is making a set of false claims about his work. Here, an important factor to take into consideration is that it was conventional for comic poets to criticize their rivals in Aristophanes' day: indeed, we know that Aristophanes himself was a victim of snipes by other comic playwrights often enough (he is accused of plagiarism more than once by his rival, Eupolis). So, perhaps the best way of understanding this *Clouds* passage is as a conventional piece of rhetoric: it is a dig by Aristophanes at his rivals of a kind that his audience would readily recognize and enjoy – without necessarily subjecting the claims to close scrutiny. It might even be the case that Aristophanes is toying with the audience here, leaving them uncertain as to whether they will, or will not, get to see some of these 'vulgar' techniques employed later in his play.

Most debates about this passage tend to end there; but I think it is worth remarking that, regardless of how we read these lines, the points about 'good' and 'bad' comedy remain. That is to say, it is significant that Aristophanes was able to put forward a case to a fifth-century B.C. audience that humour relying on words is somehow superior to physical and visual humour. And this, I think, is a prejudice worth examining, not least in case we are in danger of ourselves believing that the words of the play (which *have* come down) are somehow more important than the stage actions, props, costumes, and dancing (which have *not*).

Physical theatre

I want to press this point a little further. The emphasis that scholars now put on the performance aspects of Greek *tragedy* has yet to be fully felt in the field of Greek *comedy* – and yet understanding how Aristophanes' plays were (and still might be) performed is an essential part of studying and enjoying his work. Certainly, his comedies are not easy to stage and as a result opportunities to see Aristophanes performed are relatively few and far between. However, whenever I am fortunate enough to see Aristophanic comedy on stage, I am often struck as to how involving a play can feel in the hands of a good director and a cast that is capable of bringing out the physical and visual humour. And so what is clear to me is just how well Aristophanes understood how to write for performance. What is more, while his puns may get lost in translation and many of his more sophisticated jokes may go over the heads of a modern audience, the physical and visual aspects of his comedy often form the most amusing and memorable parts of a production.

Because of the nature of the evidence we have available, there is a temptation to study the words of Aristophanes' plays and to give scant attention to the physical actions and props which would have contributed hugely to the humour of the play for the ancient Athenians. And in addition to this, it is all too easy to think about physical humour as 'cheap slapstick' and consequently not to give it the importance it deserves. Unhelpfully, the prejudices that many of us as modern readers of Aristophanes' work might have about physical humour are reinforced by Aristophanes himself who, in *Clouds* in particular, presents us with the view that words are 'intelligent' in a way that actions are not. But just because Aristophanes may have liked to characterize himself as a clever wordsmith rather than as a master of physical theatre does not mean that this is where his talents lay.

A major part of Aristophanes' genius is that he was able to make the whole of Athens laugh and not just the city's intellectual elite. Writing good physical gags requires just as much of a comic gift as writing 'clever' verbal gags, and if Aristophanes did not always recognize his own comic genius as a physical comedian, then perhaps we at least as modern students of Aristophanes can recognize it for him.

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